

MONTANA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

Communicable Disease Control

Polio (poliomyelitis)

What is polio?

Polio is a disease with a sudden onset and is caused by a virus. Its severity ranges from a type that is non-infectious that can cause inflammation of the meninges (the membrane of the brain and spinal cord) to a type that causes paralysis and possible death.

Who gets polio?

Polio is more common in infants, children, and adolescents who live in less developed areas with poor hygiene and where people are not vaccinated against polio. Unimmunized adults who are in areas where polio is occurring can also get polio. Religious groups, whose members refuse to be vaccinated, have also had large polio outbreaks in the United States and Canada. Rare cases of polio have been associated with receiving oral polio vaccine (one in every 8.1 million doses given) and in persons who are not protected against polio and come in contact with a vaccine recipient (one in every five million doses given).

How is polio spread?

The polio virus is found in the stool (feces) of infected persons who then pass it on to others that ingest the virus. This usually happens due to poor hygiene and direct contact or close association with infected persons. Rarely, foods contaminated with infected feces, including milk, have been associated with the spread of polio.

What are the symptoms and complications of polio?

Symptoms of the disease range in severity from no symptoms to a disease which may cause paralysis and death. Symptoms include fever, tiredness, headache, nausea and vomiting, very painful muscle spasms and stiffness in the neck and back.

How soon after infection do symptoms appear?

The incubation period is usually 7-14 days in cases that have paralysis, with a range of 3 to 35 days.

When and for how long is a person able to spread polio?

Persons may be infectious from three days before to three weeks after the onset of symptoms and as long as the virus is present in the throat and feces. It is most infectious during the first few days before and after the start of symptoms.

Does past infection with polio make a person immune?

There are three types of polio virus. Life-long immunity usually depends on which type of virus a person contracts. Second attacks are rare and result from infection with a polio virus of a different type than occurred in the first attack.

What is the treatment for polio?

There is currently no cure for polio. Treatment involves supportive care (preventing loss of muscle function through physical therapy, keeping the breathing process working, ensuring good nutrition and maintaining a healthy environment).

Is there a vaccine for polio?

There are now two types of polio vaccine available: oral polio vaccine (OPV), and inactivated polio vaccine (IPV). The American Academy of Pediatrics and the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices recommend the sequential use of IPV and OPV. The primary series is given at ages 2 months (IPV), 4 months (IPV), 12-18 months (OPV), and 4-6 years (OPV).

How can, polio be prevented?

The single most effective control measure is having all persons less than 18 years old immunized properly against polio and maintaining the highest possible immunization levels in the community. Persons traveling to areas of the world where polio is occurring should also be immune. Other methods of control include prompt reporting of cases and community surveillance program to identify the occurrence of the disease.

How can I be certain that I am protected against polio?

Persons unsure of their immune status should consult their health care provider to determine necessary polio immunizations. All persons should have an immunization Record Card that documents when they received vaccination against polio. To receive an immunization card, contact your health care provider.